

# **HOTEL SPLENDIDE**

Michael Symmons Roberts

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## HOTEL SPLENDIDE

*'Et le Splendide Hotel fut batidans le chaos de glaces et de nuit du pole.'* - Rimbaud

### (i) THE NIGHT PORTER'S PROMISE

Guests returning late will get a clipped *Goodnight*,  
a blind eye turned towards that mystery companion.  
Tables will be laid for morning's conference: clean cups,  
glasses, branded pens and pads, a whiteboard  
for the *Top Ten Sales Techniques*. Beauty, solace  
I will find in details: catch of till-screen light  
on bottled spirits fat-necked in their optics,  
swags of laundry-ready sheets like shucked shrouds,  
steady hum of air-con's flight through tranquil skies.

I pledge to greet the rows of shoes left out to polish,  
with alacrity. I undertake to steer *Hotel Splendide*  
through territories of darkness without loss or lack.  
I swear on the guest-book to lay newspapers  
at every door and waken no-one, then to stare  
into the silent hours, until the silent hours stare back.

### (ii) ANIMAL OF LIGHT

That instant, in the *Hotel Splendide*, when she  
pulled the cord to let a high window  
help her find her earrings, button up her dress,  
she loosed into their room an animal of light,  
a filament so fine and quick she never saw it.

One blink, ill-timed, and he had lost it too.  
He knew it came to search them, and to show  
them what they kept unlit, the bruised fist  
of the heart, its inner walls a cave-art  
record of the beasts that make us hunter, hunted.

Elver-slim it slid beneath his skin, rifled through  
the pockets of his lungs. He coughed, but no,  
it would not let him be. Worlds away from this,  
a dog waits in a cold hall, finds the one bright  
square of sun on tiles, and sleeps in it.

### (iii) BEING BEAUTEOUS

O mother of beauty, the simple boy who said  
he saw you – who ran into the dining-room and fell  
to pieces, who made the diners spit into their soup –  
before he fell I knew it was my duty to record  
his eyewitness account, to wit:

Against the banks of snow and ice, beside  
the rose-wall, well beyond the *Hotel Splendide*'s earshot,  
there he found you, wounded by the world's griefs,  
shimmering. Your body, yes, your flesh made  
his creep out of terror and desire. *What shape?*

I asked. *What form of body?* But the more he said  
the less he knew. He lay in rapture, glass eyes  
and St Vitas' tongue. Why did you choose  
a messenger so unfit to bear truth, the single truth  
we had to hear, o mother, o mother of beauty?

### (iv) HIRAETH

You know that sense of homesickness? Here's why:  
late one night, in the kitchens of *Hotel Splendide*,  
acommis chef was practising his crème brûlée  
and dropped the torch, which lit a cloth  
hung on his belt, which tripped the heat alarms.

The car park filled with shivering guests,  
then rumours and a racket spread, until all over town  
the frightened took to streets in flight from unseen fires.  
Contagion seized the wires. Within weeks nations  
camped in forests; fleeing radiation, plague or blaze.

They tried to build their lost towns somewhere else,  
in exile until wild was home, and new was old.  
Even now, when we turn to mount a step that isn't there,  
reach for a door and meet a wall, we sense the maps  
of those still empty towns are written in us.